

Characteristics of Historically-Informed Performance of the Mozart Sonatas for Violin and Piano

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Abstract

The article describes the new tendencies of the interpretations of W. A. Mozart's music. It describes the development of the genre during XVIII century in general and during Mozart's life in particular, and explains the appearance of different performing traditions, relations, and compromises between historically-oriented and "academic" ways of performing. The interpretation of classical or romantic works turns often to the decoding the author's intention, since there are usually no evidences of the "correct" version – no audio recordings, and the most detailed treatise still describes something which is impossible to describe. If the problem of ornamentation is at least presented in written in the literature and tables, the point of tempo or timing stays very subjective. Thus the interpretation of the music of Mozart is a difficult problem for the performer and for the musicologist. The article consists of examples and descriptions of various ways of performance and comparison between "authentic" and "modern" interpretations. Special attention turns timing and articulation as specific ways of historically-oriented style of playing.

Keywords: Mozart; Classicism; Chamber Music; Historically-Informed Performance; Timing; Articulation

1. Introduction

Speaking about the interpretation of classical or romantic works, we are faced with the question of deciphering the author's intention – there are usually no audio recordings, and the most detailed treatise is still a verbal description of something indescribable. If some questions, such as ornamentation, are thoroughly presented in the literature, the point of tempo or timing allow very

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subjective interpretations. The interpretation of the music of Mozart is a difficult problem for the performer and for the musicologist.

It has become particularly acute in the late few decades, when the music treasury of the XVIII century got an approach called authentic – when the interpretation of the musical piece forms with the help of its immersion into the historical, cultural and theoretical context of the epoch. The works of Mozart, which existed in the musical practice of his time, can hardly be understood without knowledge of its traditions – the conditions of musical practice, the ideas about the genres and principles of composition, features of performance and publishing business.

At the same time, even nowadays, some musicians turn to the romanticized interpretation, peculiar rather to the traditions of the XIXth and the first half of the XXth centuries. However, most of the duets playing and recording Mozart's sonatas for clavier and violin, more-less (sometimes quite significantly), are "confessed" by historically informed performance (HIP), which requires the deep knowledge in the theory and the performance practice of the XVIII century.

Of course, the modern musician can choose any approach to the performance of Mozart sonatas, but a historically adequate view to the composer's works in general and in particular could in many respects contribute to the creation of the most correct performing idea. The formation of this approach to the works of Mozart was promoted by the publication of the scholarly verified New Complete Works (*Neue Mozart Ausgabe*, Bärenreiter, 1956-2006), which is today the basis for musicological research and performance, as well as the Complete Mozart's Family Correspondence Collection, the publication of documents, the latest research, clarifying the dating of pieces.

However, it should be remembered that the most authoritative theorists and practitioners of the historically informed performance considered the taste of the performer – the decisive criterion. Leopold Mozart's *Fundamental School of Playing Violin* stays the very important document. The composer himself in his letters to his father many times describes the performance of his works and the reaction of the audience to them. This is very interesting information, since they speak not only about the audience's perception of the dynamic effects, but also about the fact that Mozart carefully planned them.

With the greatest ingenuity, Mozart did everything to achieve maximum effect, and the audience's understanding was so important for him that even the applause between parts of the pieces and in the pauses did not irritate him, assumes N. Harnoncourt (1995). According to the researcher, even the presence of a reprise can be explained by the fact that while playing for the first time, some new idea could "drown" in the noise of applause and therefore needed to be repeated. It is important that the audience in the days of Mozart needed constant artistic surprises and novelties, waited and demanded them – and the composer sought to satisfy this need, while the audience of our time prefer popular and well-known works. That is why only some of Mozart's works, often not the most significant and not the most original ones, are especially popular, while the rest, often more intricate in the artistic finds and musical language, remain on the sidelines. Therefore, we would like to encourage performers to search for unbeaten paths, which will undoubtedly reward them with the discovery of new or half-forgotten masterpieces.

The composer worked in a turning point for Western European instrumental music. The sonata for clavier and violin was also involved in the sphere of change. The intensity of its development was exceptional: for more than half a century it has gone through a turbulent evolution. The extreme points of this evolution are the accompanying sonata of the 1750s, which is closely connected with domestic music-making, and the chamber sonata-duet (1780s), a large-scale composition of a concert nature. The changes that have occurred in this genre have affected all the main criteria, ranging from the scope of the musical practice, the technique of performance to the

style, features of texture and ensemble balance. V. Esakov (2008), in his work on the sonatas of Mozart, notes that the rebirth of the accompanying sonatas into the chamber took place in three stages. From the music for the domestic music-making with the traditional for it ensemble balance (the leading role of the clavier and the optional role of the violin), the development of the genre led to the appearance of the “Mannheim” sonatas which marked the second stage. The experience of the instrumental writing, obtained by Mozart in Mannheim, led to the gradual emancipation of the violin part, which from the auxiliary member of the ensemble becomes equal. The sonatas of the Vienna period, belonging to the third stage, already represented a new genre with equal and virtuoso interaction of instruments and complex dramaturgy. In other words, they transformed into a chamber sonata for violin and piano. The role of Mozart in the development of this genre was very important, as soon as many of Mozart’s colleagues and contemporaries continued to create unpretentious opuses for home music.

The performance of the Mozart sonatas with their peculiarities of composition, structure, texture, with their ornamentation, timing, dynamic and timbre details is due to the scholar and performing knowledge of his time. That is why the historical approach to interpreting the music of the ancient epochs that is widespread today, being increasingly fashionable, the most promising and adequate. Not only the harpsichord, for which early sonatas were composed, but also the hammer piano, on which Mozart performed his late sonatas, had a clear and transparent sound, more organically blending with the violin timbre than the modern piano. In these straight-strung instruments with a wooden frame the wood fibers of the deck were located parallel to the strings, and this gave its own deck-resonance zone to each string. Thus, every part of the sound range had its own colour. The pedal, controlled by the knee, was used as the timbre colour, and the relatively modest dynamic range gave to the performer an opportunity not to restrain his temperament in the contrasts and to articulate quite prominently. These techniques cannot be transferred to the modern Steinway piano literally, since the result is likely to be somewhat redundant. However, an understanding of the initial features of the instrument and the performing practice of Mozart’s time, of course, can make the most convincing and harmonious compromise between the historically based techniques and the methods which are more integrated into modern performing practice. The violin from the Mozart’s time has also somewhat changed, although less than clavier, its sound was influenced by the use of metal strings instead of gut strings and a slightly different manner of playing, using vibrations more intensively. In this regard, a modern performer is faced with the problem of either choosing of an instrument (of Mozart times, or designed according to the corresponding samples), or a desire to agree on the composer’s original intent and features of modern instruments.

As for tempo and timing, the tempos was carefully written by Mozart in almost every part of the sonatas. However, since our ideas about the Mozart tempo have changed, the knowledge of its interpretation in the XVIIIth century is necessary to choose the right pace. In general, we can say that Mozart was not a supporter of either too fast or too slow tempos, as indicated by many of his statements. In addition to the author’s instructions, the measure, the harmonic pattern, the affect, the shortest note values of a particular movement, and other nuances of the composer’s writing influence the correct tempo choice. Interestingly, in some cases the tempo palette chosen by the performers for performing the same music is extremely wide and deeply changes the character of the music. In the same time it is not possible to indicate which of the options is correct. The problem of dynamics and acoustic balance is quite acute: in the early sonatas, with rare exceptions, there are practically no dynamic indications, but in the late ones they are given in sufficient detail. However, in many cases, the dynamics and acoustic balance are related to the texture density and functionality of voices. The phrasing and articulation in Mozart music also present many

difficulties for the interpreter. The main problem is a mixture of concepts of phrasing and articulation, often allowed by the editors. Mozart did not have phrasal leagues at all; besides, he was often incoherent in the arranging of leagues, putting them in the different places in different ways. Each such fact is a reason for detailed analysis and requires an individual approach of the embodiment of the author's intention. It is curious that, in spite of the common opinion in the chamber music practice, the similar material for violin and piano must not always be performed with the same strokes, according to the author's idea. Allowing different strokes for different instruments, following the author's strokes, the musician gives a multi-layered nature and variety to the texture, which get destroyed by the same type of articulation. In order to form one's own auditory representations, it is interesting to consider different performances of Mozart's sonatas for clavier and violin and different theoretical approaches. For example, the duos H. Cooper – R. Podger, L. Devos – S. Kuijken belong to the authentic style, within which it is supposed to play on old instruments or their modern copies and to present the historical manner of performance. The peculiarities of "authentic" performance on string instruments include using vibrato as the way to emphasize a semantic accent or playing without vibrato; the use of gut strings, a lower tuning, a certain way of holding an instrument and bow and a specific sound. However, since the knowledge about the performance practice of Mozart's time is contained mainly in treatises and other literary sources, it should be remembered that the historically oriented interpretation is based on the pronouncing the verbal texts, which means that it still allows a plurality of interpretations.

The conditions, clear to the composer's contemporaries, do not seem obvious to the musicians of our days. Therefore, even in this approach there can be no axiomatic postulates. The historically informed performance involves performing exclusively on an old instrument, and from this point of view only the duos Cooper-Podger and Kuijken-Devos can be considered authentic (in the studied versions). However, in the modern performing practice the more flexible approach is possible, using the instruments of a later times, but with historically accurate following the tempo, dynamic, agogical practices of the Mozart era. The information about them can be gathered from the theoretical works of L. Mozart, D. G. Turk, I. I. Quanz, C. P. E. Bach, the luminaries of the authentic performance A. Dolmetsch, Adolf Beishlag, Robert Donington, Frederick Neumann, Sandra Rosenblum, from separate articles by Wanda Landowska, Nicolaus Harnoncourt and others. The material of these treatises makes it possible to more accurately interpret (both from the point of view of musicology and performing) Mozart's chamber opuses. N. Harnoncourt (1995) wrote: "Only to the contemporaries of Mozart his music was understandable in all its wealth, subsequent generations could not comprehend [his] art in its entirety." The performance by D. Barenboim and I. Perlman is more academic in the messaging of style, it presents an extensive palette of timbre colours, L. Orkis and A.-S. Mutter show a special brightness in the presentation of the material, sometimes paradoxical tempo, dynamic and articulation solutions. Devos-Kuijken's sonatas are more expressive and dynamically contrasted. The duet Cooper-Podger attracts attention with a variety of articulation techniques. All these performances confirm the multivariate reading of the author's text, making each of these interpretations a kind of editorial version. The holistic and authentic understanding and "reproduction" of Mozart's music is indeed one of the most important and most difficult tasks for any musicologist and performer. This is determined by a number of factors. Among them the most important is the imaginary simplicity of his music. That is why the experience of authoritative experts in this field is very important for young performers.

The ancient hammer pianoforte (Hammerflügel) has little in common with the modern grand piano, unified already at the end of the XIXth century; Mozart's instruments, Beethoven's, Brahms's, Debussy's pianos are fundamentally different in terms of mechanics and design. XVIIIth

century pianos are often criticized today for their lack of expressive power, but pianoforte (fortepiano) can lead to new opportunities in the interpretation. “Mozart’s piano has numerous virtues that he undoubtedly appreciated. He wrote three very detailed letters to his father in 1777, when he first saw Stein’s pianos in Augsburg, describing them with very flattering expressions. And yet, the piano that Mozart knew was not too loud; a quick sound attack, followed by a rather quick fading of sound, is something that Mozart perfectly knew how to use, – reminds Harnoncourt (1995). The idea of a historical approach to such compositions as an attempt to recreate the performing techniques of the past is ambiguous. The most talented representatives of this tendency use evidence and facts from the sources of the past to understand the direction on the path of our own interpretation”.

“Mozart is eternal and relevant at all times,” says the HIP supporter Aleksey Lyubimov (Krotenko, 2014). “But it seems to me that for the creative work he was satisfied enough by XVIIIth century resources, this art is absolutely complete. He never complained about the imperfection of the performers and instruments, he was satisfied with what the era put at his disposal. Mozart did not seek to write the music of the future. He entered the context of his time quite naturally.”

“Interpretation cannot be completely determined by some historical evidence; but to be guided by them is possible, says the American pianist and fortepianist, a prominent representative of the HIP Eliot Gardiner (1990). - After all, your interpretation begins to arise from the moment you make a decision regarding tempo, dynamics, and phrasing. This is something that is not absolute, these are things that should be thought out and determined by each performer, and each performer will solve these problems in different ways”. Malcolm Bilson, musician, scholar, professor, connoisseur of XIXth century piano music — from Haydn to Schubert — is the author of a rather controversial, yet argued and convincing concept of the relationship between dynamic shades and timing. The most recent samples, for example, works by Rachmaninov, are supported by recordings made by the author himself. “The meaning of using old instruments,” Bilson (1990) insists, “is not to remove the element of choice, but to investigate the message contained in the music. The instruments themselves in a certain sense dictate the sound and rhythm. Looking at the Mozart division into phrases, at his articulation, at his dynamics marks, you soon find out that it is thus much easier to implement these instructions than when using modern instruments, when everything leads towards a long legato melodic line. In the performances on the modern instruments, inevitable problems arise, leading to the results that, apparently, contradict the scores of Mozart. Therefore, on a modern piano, a number of techniques lose their meaning, but an understanding of the original idea, of course, opens up a much broader and diverse perspective for the performer. The role of historical awareness in creating such performances is that there is a basic work that must be done to understand the rhetorical customs of the time, pronunciation, which was then used. The actor must speak his words clearly, with the correct intonation, otherwise the set of words will be meaningless. The same is true, according to Bilson (1990), for piano of the XVIII century: “Every piano has the strongest bass, but the modern piano has an over-weighted sound in them. Thus, when the pianist plays Mozart, he tries to soften the sound. As a result, the vivacity and energy that Mozart invested in bass voices becomes smoother; the strength and sound of modern piano in this register does not lead to the idea of the possibility of an active and decisive approach to performance. In the upper register, there are fewer problems which are not so noticeable, but there is a more noticeable difference in the different voices of the Mozart piano, the difference between the upper and bass notes that Mozart uses to some extent in his compositions. Modern piano with its excellent homogenous sound in all registers perfectly suits other music, but in this case hides the

drama and diversity inherent to the music. “Therefore, on historical instruments, Mozart’s music can appear in its true colors, unusually dramatic and stormy.” Any musical notation is conditional, according to Bilson (1990). In his project ‘studying the score’, he admits a certain degree of freedom when reading rhythmic formulas, durations, dynamic designations. If some of the rules mentioned by him and well-known in the time of Mozart, are still quite convincing: such as the tradition to distinguish a high note and dissonance, some are controversial for the national teaching tradition – such as the need to play shorter note values quicker and longer ones slower, or the various interpretation of the dotted rhythm. Bilson goes quite far in his findings, a number of which can be called quite polemical: in his opinion, the lengths written by the composer are subject to adjustment depending on the context; thus, a quarter can be reduced to the length of an eighth, even in a situation where the eighth note written in the other hand would seem to assume a difference in duration in the right and left hands. In his conviction, any dynamic “fork”, any accent or «sF» entails the use of timing. However, if in the case of Mozart it is not possible to check the correctness of this theory, then in a similar situation with the music of Rachmaninov or Prokofiev, who left the audio recordings, this theory is supported by the evidences in the form of the “embodiment” of their works by the composers themselves. These audio documents very clearly demonstrate the relationship between the dynamic indications and their agogical embodiment in execution. Thus, Bilson acts as a representative of the point of view which assumes the active and proactive role of the performer in the interpretation of the text, while representatives of the opposite position pedantically follow the Mozart score in its literal form.

A number of tendencies of the modern performance testify that even today instrumentalists are not averse to the romanticized interpretation dating back to the XIXth century. However, most of the duets performing Mozart’s sonatas for clavier and violin, in one way or another, follow historically informed performance, trying to embody this music historically most reliably. Such an approach to the analysis of the Mozart’s pieces lies in line with today’s widespread trend of historical authenticity and seems promising.

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